

Sentence Structure Handout 086

Sentence Clarity

In order to write clear, effective sentences, you need to avoid the following types of errors:

- Misplaced or Dangling Modifier
- Nonparallel Structure
- Wordiness and Redundancy
- Tense and Voice Shift

Misplaced or Dangling Modifiers

Misplaced or dangling modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that confuse the meaning of a sentence. They are easily recognized because their position in the sentence makes the sentence meaningless or unclear.

Misplaced Modifier

A misplaced modifier can be a word, phrase, or clause that is incorrectly positioned in a sentence. This handout discusses only prepositional phrases and relative-pronoun clauses (those clauses beginning with *who*, *that*, and *which*) that are often misplaced in a sentence.

Misplaced modifiers can be easily corrected by placing the words, phrases, or clauses next to the words they modify. Look at the following examples.

1. Example: The new book was read by every student on the second shelf.

Explanation: The students were not on the second shelf, so this prepositional phrase is misplaced. It needs to be placed next to the word it modifies: *book*.

Correction: The new book on the second shelf was read by every student.

2. Example: The cowboy was thrown by the bull with a leather vest.

Explanation: A bull would look rather ridiculous with a vest, so the prepositional phrase is misplaced. It needs to be placed next to the word it modifies: *cowboy*.

Correction: The cowboy with a leather vest was thrown by the bull.

3. Example: We sold our car to a used car dealer that had a cracked cylinder head.

Explanation: A person (the dealer) does not have a cylinder head, so the clause that had a cracked cylinder head must modify the car. The clause needs to be placed right after the word it modifies: *car*.

Correction: We sold our car that had a cracked cylinder head to a used car dealer.

4. Example: The car was towed off the turnpike which had a flat tire.

Explanation: The turnpike did not have a flat tire, so the clause which had a flat tire must modify the car. The clause needs to be placed right after the word it modifies: *car*.

Correction: The car which had a flat tire was towed off the turnpike.

EXERCISES: Read each pair of sentences and choose the one that does not contain a misplaced modifier by circling either *a* or *b*.

1. a. Don't give the fish with small bones in it to the cat.
b. Don't give the fish to the cat with small bones in it.
2. a. The train station was located by a river which was made of red brick.
b. The train station which was made of red brick was located by a river.
3. a. He found a pie on the top shelf of the refrigerator baked by his wife.
b. On the top shelf of the refrigerator, he found a pie baked by his wife.
4. a. Mr. Smith spotted a bird sitting on a telephone wire that he could not recognize.
b. Mr. Smith spotted a bird that he could not recognize sitting on a telephone wire.
5. a. We bought a picnic table with collapsible legs from a clerk.
b. We bought a picnic table from a clerk with collapsible legs.
6. a. I gave the scraps of meat to the dog which had been left on the dinner plates.
b. I gave the scraps of meat which had been left on the dinner plates to the dog.
7. a. We watched the man on the roof jump to the ground.
b. We watched the man jump to the ground on the roof.
8. a. From the antique store dealer, we bought a round dining room table with massive oak legs.
b. From the antique store dealer with massive oak legs, we bought a dining room table.

9. a. The boy's mom threw the pants that were old and torn into the garbage can.
b. The boy's mom that was old and torn threw the pants into the garbage can.
10. a. Mr. Jackson with a cane bottom sat in a chair.
b. Mr. Jackson sat in a chair with a cane bottom.

Dangling Modifier

Three types of phrases can sometimes be “dangling”:

- prepositional phrase (with a red tie)
- infinitive phrase (to run quickly) (infinitive phrases consist of the word *to* plus a verb)
- *-ed* or *-ing* phrase (riding his bike)

These modifying phrases are dangling when they appear at the beginning of a sentence, are followed by a comma, and do not modify the subject of the sentence. To correct a dangling modifier, make sure that the subject (the first noun or subject pronoun after the comma) is the word being described or modified. Dangling modifiers usually require a revision of the entire sentence.

1. Example: Riding his bike down the road, a dog attacked Bill.

Explanation: Did a dog ride his bike, or did Bill ride his bike? Obviously, Bill did the riding. Therefore, the word *Bill* should appear after the comma and serve as the subject.

Correction: Riding his bike down the road, Bill was attacked by the dog.

2. Example: To get a good night's rest, a firm mattress is important.

Explanation: Is the mattress getting a good night's rest? No, but neither is anything or anyone else. This infinitive phrase does not modify any word in the sentence. You need to revise this sentence, putting in the word that's being modified: *you*. Place it after the comma and use it as the subject.

Correction: To get a good night's rest, you need to sleep on a firm mattress.

3. Example: At the age of sixteen, the present was a watch.

Explanation: A birthday present is not sixteen. This prepositional phrase does not modify any word in the sentence. You need to revise this sentence by putting in the word that is being modified: *she*. Place it after the comma and use it as the subject.

Correction: At the age of sixteen, she received a watch as a present.

4. Example: When a little girl, my brother threw a rock at me.

Explanation: Was my brother a little girl, or was *I* (or *she*) a little girl? Obviously, the phrase *when a little girl* should modify the word *I* (or *she*). This sentence has to be rewritten so that the word *I* (or *she*) can be subject. It should be placed after the comma.

Correction: When a little girl, I was hit by a rock thrown by my brother.

5. Example: Used for a short time, the Brooks expect a good price for their car.

Explanation: The car was used for a short time, not the Brooks, so the word *car* needs to be placed after the comma and used as the subject.

Correction: Used for a short time, the Brooks' car should sell for a good price. (Notice the word *Brooks'* is used as an adjective to modify the subject word *car*.)

EXERCISES: Read each paper of sentences and choose the one that does not contain a dangling modifier by circling either *a* or *b*.

1. a. Dancing all night, the dawn was seen by everyone.
b. Dancing all night, everyone saw the dawn.
2. a. To make a light cake, the eggs should be beaten separately.
b. To make a light cake, you should beat the eggs separately.
3. a. Paddling furiously, we were able to reach land..
b. Paddling furiously, land was finally reached.
4. a. While attending the college concert, my stomach hurt.
b. While attending the college concert, I got an upset stomach.
5. a. To do well in school, studying is necessary.
b. To do well in school, a person needs to study.

6. a. By sitting around and talking, our work will never get done.
b. By sitting around and talking, we will never get our work done.
7. a. While waiting for a bus, a passing car splashed me.
b. While waiting for a bus, I was splashed by a passing bus.
8. a. Passed over for promotion, the disappointment was obvious in the young man.
b. Passed over for the promotion, the young man was disappointed.
9. a. Having caught pneumonia, I had to postpone my trip.
b. Having caught pneumonia, my trip had to be postponed..
10. a. After roasting for five hours at 325 degrees, the turkey was delicious.
b. After roasting for five hours at 325 degrees, we ate the delicious turkey.

Nonparallel Structure

When a series of verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, or phrases are joined with a conjunction (FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), all the items must be in the same form. For example, balance verbs with verbs, nouns with nouns, adjectives with adjectives, and so forth. When these items are not in the same form, nonparallel structure results. Look at the following examples.

Coordinated Nouns in a Series

Nonparallel: The ad shows the product's charm, safety, and how strong it was.

Parallel: The ad shows the product's charm, safety, and strength.

Coordinated Adjectives in a Series

Nonparallel: The case is flexible, sturdy, and has a lot of space.

Parallel: The case is flexible, sturdy, and spacious.

Coordinated Verbs in a Series

Nonparallel: I checked the counters, talked to the clerk, and to make a decision.

Parallel: I checked the counters, talked to the clerk, and made a decision.

Coordinated Phrases in a Series

Nonparallel: Their goals were to increase sales, to reduce expenses, and investigating new ideas.

Parallel: Their goals were to increase sales, to reduce expenses, and to investigate new ideas.

OR

Their goals were to increase sales, reduce expenses, and investigate ideas.

Explanation: When dealing with infinitive phrases (to + a verb), you can maintain parallel structure by putting the *to* in front of all the phrases or putting the *to* only in front of the first item of the series. The *to* must be placed either in front of each phrase OR in front of only the first phrase.

This same guidance applies to series of prepositional phrases that all begin with the same preposition. Either use the preposition with all items in the series or use it for just the first item in the series. Look at the following example.

Nonparallel: We went for a swim in the morning, in the afternoon, and the evening.

Parallel: We went for a swim in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening.

OR

We went for a swim in the morning, the afternoon, and the evening.

EXERCISES: Read each pair of sentences and choose the one that is parallel by circling either *a* or *b*.

1. a. Joy is pretty, intelligent, but has a temper.
b. Joy is pretty, intelligent, but hot-tempered.
2. a. Ted was given money for his dorm, for his meals, and for his books.
b. Ted was given money for his dorm, to buy his meals, and his books.
3. a. I enjoy eating hot dogs, drinking lemonade, and to play tennis.
b. I enjoy eating hot dogs, drinking lemonade, and playing tennis.
4. a. In the summer, I work as a typist, babysitter, and house cleaner.
b. In the summer, I work as a typist, babysitter, and I clean houses.
5. a. We will clean under the sink, in the tub, and wash over the stove.
b. We will clean under the sink, in the tub, and over the stove.
6. a. Mary's dad promised to buy a new car and that he would let me drive it.
b. Mary's dad promised to buy a new car and to let me drive it.
7. a. The department store is known for good service, quality merchandise, and the salespeople are courteous.
b. The department store is known for good service, quality merchandise, and courteous sales people.
8. a. Mary will go to the park, the zoo, and to the library..
b. Mary will go to the park, the zoo, and the library.
9. a. On our trip, we met many people who were kind, nice, and helpful.
b. On our trip, we met many people who were kind, nice, and helped us.
10. a. Terry has mastered skills in writing, math, and is excellent in history.
b. Terry has mastered skills in writing, math, and history.

Wordiness and Redundancy

When you write, avoid wordiness and needless repetition. Many times wordiness occurs because of an attempt to lengthen a sentence and make it sound “better.” Look at the following examples.

1. Example: Because Howie was illiterate and could neither read nor write, the other students ridiculed him.

Explanation: If a person is illiterate, he can neither read nor write, so the words and could neither read nor write are redundant (unnecessary).

Correction: Because Howie was illiterate, the other students ridiculed him.

2. Example: We two both ate the apple together at the same time.

Explanation: The word two and the phrase at the same time are redundant because the word both means two and the word together means at the same time.

Correction: We both ate the apple together.

3. Example: During his later years of his elderly life, my grandfather was senile and forgot many things.

Explanation: The phrase of his elderly life is redundant. It means the same as during his later years. Also, to be senile means to forget things.

Correction: During his later years, my grandfather was senile.

EXERCISES: Read each pair of sentences and choose the one that is not redundant or wordy by circling either *a* or *b*. (Hint: Look for the sentence that is written briefly and concisely.)

1. a. Mom had many various jobs for us to do around the house.
 b. Mom had various jobs for us to do around the house.

2. a. In the past, four presidents have been killed.
 b. In past history, four presidents have been killed.

3. a. All of a sudden, Jimmy quickly slammed on the brakes and stopped the car.
 b. Jimmy quickly slammed on the brakes.

4. a. I never met her until yesterday.
b. I never at all met her until the day before today, which was yesterday.
5. a. In the middle of the center of the ring, the huge, giant elephants danced.
b. In the center of the ring, the huge elephants danced.
6. a. Everyone in the class – the teacher, the parents, and the students - was surprised at the news.
b. Everyone in the class was surprised at the news.
7. a. Cathy occasionally does her homework.
b. Cathy occasionally does her homework at times.
8. a. Future educators need to prepare their students for a constantly changing world.
b. Future educators of tomorrow need to prepare their students for a constantly changing world.
9. a. The game is played with tiny balls.
b. The game is played with tiny round balls..
10. a. After descending down to the river, we boarded a small raft.
b. After descending to the river, we boarded a small raft.

TENSE AND VOICE SHIFTS

When writing, stay in one tense. Needlessly shifting tenses can cause confusion and misunderstanding.

Also, avoid switching from active to passive voice. Active voice means that the subject is the “doer” of the action whereas passive voice means that the subject is not the “doer” of the action. (See example 2 below.)

1. Example: The man will leave tomorrow and went to Ohio.

Explanation: One verb is in the future tense; the other is in the past tense. Either make them both future or make them both past.

Correction: The man will leave tomorrow and will go to Ohio. (future tense)

2. Example: The man made the rocking chair, and the cradle was made by him, too.

Explanation: The first verb made is in the active voice: The man made the chair. However, the second verb was made is in the passive voice. The subject of this sentence is cradle; however, the cradle did not make itself.

Correction: The man made the rocking chair and made the cradle.

EXERCISES: Read each pair of sentences and choose the one that maintains consistent tense and voice by circling either *a* or *b*.

1. a. Carl approached the door and opened it without making a sound.
b. Carl approached the door and opens it without making a sound.
2. a. When Professor Callahan explained the algebra problem, Ray understood the formula.
b. When Professor Callahan explained the algebra problem, Ray understands the formula.
3. a. Mary washed the dinner dishes, and they were dried by her, too.
b. Mary washed and dried the dinner dishes.
4. a. Dad leaves at noon and went to the meeting.
b. Dad left at noon and went to the meeting.
5. a. Birds sing in the clearing, and a small stream winds slowly through the valley.
b. Birds sing in the clearing, and a small stream wound slowly through the valley.
6. a. Jennie goes to school and will get her test grade.
b. Jennie will go to school and will get her test grade.
7. a. As soon as I left, I drove home.
b. As soon as I will leave, I drove home.
8. a. Last week, I finished my report and types it, too.
b. Last week, I finished my report and typed it, too.
9. a. Dad fixed the washing machine, and the typewriter was fixed by him, too.
b. Dad fixed the washing machine and the typewriter.
10. a. Barbara left the party and drives to her home.
b. Barbara left the party and drove to the home.

Sentence Clarity Review

DIRECTIONS: Choose the sentence that is most clearly written by circling the letter of your choice. (Read all choices before making your decision.)

1.
 - a. The two twins both did their homework.
 - b. The twins both did their homework.
 - c. Last night, the two both did their homework in the evening.
 - d. Last night, the twins did their homework.

2.
 - a. With her bonus money, Mary decided to paint the kitchen, carpet the dining room, and to buy a new stereo.
 - b. With her bonus money, Mary decided to paint the kitchen, carpet the dining room, and buy a new stereo.
 - c. With her bonus money, Mary decided to paint the kitchen, put carpet in the dining room, and to buy a new stereo.
 - d. With her bonus money, Mary decided to paint the kitchen, carpeting the dining room, and buying a new stereo.

3.
 - a. The teacher that was explaining the lesson has three different homework assignments.
 - b. Having three different homework assignments, the teacher explained the lesson.
 - c. The teacher explained the lesson, which has three different homework assignments.
 - d. The lesson was explained by the teacher that has three different homework assignments.

4.
 - a. To join the service, a test had to be passed by Helen.
 - b. To join the service, Helen had to pass a test.
 - c. Joining the service, a test had to be passed by Helen.
 - d. A test had to be passed by the service which Helen wanted to join.

5.
 - a. The horse was ridden by the best jockey with the star on his forehead.
 - b. The horse was ridden with the star on its forehead by the best jockey.
 - c. The horse with the star on its forehead was ridden by the best jockey.
 - d. Riding the horse, a star was on its forehead, and the jockey was the best.

6.
 - a. The little baby had a pacifier, a bottle, and a rattle.
 - b. The little baby had a pacifier, had a bottle, and a rattle.
 - c. The little baby had a pacifier, a bottle, and had a rattle.
 - d. The little baby had a pacifier, a bottle, too, and rattles.

7. a. Flying over the Alps, the view is magnificent.
b. Flying over the Alps, magnificent is the view.
c. While I was flying over the Alps, the view was magnificent.
d. Flying, which is over the Alps, is magnificent.
8. a. Tara sings to entertain, for relaxation, and earning money.
b. Tara sings to entertain, relaxing, and to earn money.
c. Tara sings to entertain, to relax, and to earn money.
d. Tara sings to entertain, for relaxation, and to earn money.
9. a. He loves westerns, spy movies, and comedies are lovable.
b. He loves westerns, spy movies, and comedies.
c. He loves westerns, to see spy movies, and watches comedies.
d. He loves watching westerns, to see spy movies, and watching comedies.
10. a. There is a button on my coat that is round.
b. Being round, my coat has a button.
c. My coat has a button that is round.
d. My coat, which is round, has a button.

DIRECTIONS: Choose the sentence that uses verbs correctly by circling the letter of your choice. (Read all choices before making your decision.)

1. a. The racers start their engines and checked their lights.
b. After Billy left, I cleaned the house.
c. Noticing the accident, Tommy quickly raced to the phone and calls the police.
d. Many college students were in school today, and they all are finishing their lessons.
2. a. I changed clothes before I gone out last night.
b. We look forward to saw you tomorrow at the party.
c. The woman sipped from the mug sits on the table.
d. I will go to the bank, withdraw the money, and go to the movies.
3. a. Forgetting his wallet, John runs home quickly and will get it.
b. The girl did not have the necessary skills for the job and was not hired.
c. Our class leaves next Friday and returned on Sunday.
d. The contestant will raise his hand and answered the difficult question.
4. a. As soon as I hear from you, I will notify everyone.
b. At various times, I run four miles a day and swims twenty laps.
c. The teacher usually hands back the test and then went over them.
d. On Thursday, my neighbor washed his car and waxes it, too.

5.
 - a. The students will return next fall and left in the spring.
 - b. The test covered the basic skills and determined the students' final grade.
 - c. My aunt writes to the senator and will get an answer soon.
 - d. Ms. Smith makes the pie and added eggs to the recipe.

To further check your skills, as the Sentence Clarity Exercises A and B.